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ABSTRACT

While there have been many gains made in second language instruction as a result of the communicative movement, such as increased sensitivity to learner needs, the movement to some extent, may be considered an extension of a general relativism, promoted at the expense of demanding and serious content. Second language educators have become pessimistic, and could have higher expectations for their students. One solution would be to use more sophisticated content. Another approach worth considering is to address the learner's own identity, linking one's willingness to make errors to one's role as a learner, and viewing language learning as an act of identity. Second language educators need to ask what being a speaker of the second language means in the learner's own social context, what social group the learner would join as a user of that language, what kinds of expressions and understandings are appropriate to a user of that language in the learner's home context, and how the learner would wish to be perceived as a user of the second language. (MSE)

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# MUST LANGUAGE TEACHING BE COMMUNICATIVE?

Let us begin by considering the opinions of some learners.

'There would be a short passage of some six or seven lines of English. I remember one that began: "We are told that the Sultan Mahmoud by his perpetual wars abroad, and his tyranny at home, had filled the dominions of his forefathers with ruin and desolation and had unpeopled the Persian Empire." Underneath each word there would be its literal translation into French, thus: "Nous sommes dits que le sultan Mahmoud, par ses perpetuelles guerres au dehors ...." And finally there was the translation into good French: "On nous dit ...." Thus you had a clear idea of the relative construction of English phrases and French. It was a simple, but brilliant system. I was interested, and I learnt it all by heart in no time.' (Rambert 1972: 45)

'My method of learning Russian was so simple that I am surprised it is not generally used by people who need to learn a new language in a hurry. I had no compunction about pressing everybody I met into my teaching staff, and with good temper and much laughter everybody turned tutor. But that was not my real secret. I made friends with Russian children and, even more important, I bought and studied the Russian child's first reading books, the equivalents to "The cat ate the rat" and then, more advanced, "The blue cat ate the purple rat", and so on. Working through these simple readings, I promoted myself as it were a year each week, so that, starting as a child of five learning to read for the first time, I was, at the end of a month or so, a rather backward child of ten.' (Ransome 1976: 161)

'I also learnt German, mainly by reading works of history in German and looking up every word in the dictionary. I taught myself to write German Schrift so as to be able to read it later .... However I worked hard in other ways at perfecting my German. I found an English teacher from a local secondary school and spent many hours with her pronouncing vowels until they sounded truly German .... I also picked up broad Viennese from the grooms at the riding school.' (Taylor 1983: 90 and 92)

'Through my sister, who had come from the country, I managed to get four copies of the Bible in different languages. So I read the Gospels, verse by verse, with the help of the little knowledge of German and French that I had acquired in school, and side by side with this a parallel reading in English and Italian. In a few months, I made excellent progress in this way.' (Trotsky 1929: 118)

Examples such as these could be repeated many times without any difficulty. Furthermore, the opinion of participants in more serious discussion will often support similar views. One con-

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tributor to Pickett's survey of the practices of successful language learners writes: 'Method of learning: learn how the language is organised. The grammar, inflections, conjugations, declensions etc. etc.' (Pickett 1978: 61), and several other contributors repeat this theme. Methods of language learning, in fact, are as varied as the personalities of language learners, and many more peculiar means than these have been tried out. But of course language teaching is not the same as language learning, and most of the learners cited have been writing about private study. Most of us as teachers have to engage in a public and social activity, and our methodology has to take into account groups of learners, usually large groups whose members cannot have all their wishes or needs taken into account.

Nonetheless, there has been a consensus by methodologists in recent years, and it is always sensible to question conventional assumptions about what is and is not appropriate behaviour in education, for there is a constant temptation to allow 'coping strategies' to dictate methodology.

What is surprising about recent developments in communicative language teaching is that often the improvements demanded have seemed to go directly counter to 'coping strategies'; indeed they have often placed what appear to be impossible demands on the teacher. This may be related to a general trend, in which governments and the press appear to demand of teachers solutions to all the problems confronting society: in Britain teacher education courses are expected to deal with computers and health education, relations with industry and the integration of the handicapped, to name only a few themes, with no extra resources and no diminution of existing content!

But the communicative approach has asked us to adjust to the needs of particular groups of students, to base our syllabuses on vaguely-formulated theoretical categories like 'function', to make our classes more active, to use authentic rather than simplified materials, to care for each of our learners, to individualise, to make our classes noisier. And any teacher will add to this list from bitter personal experience.

At the same time, there are strong arguments from research and practical experience to support many of the changes. Yet in our search for the 'best' teaching we can manage, we need to avoid the effects of any bandwaggon. The arguments for being communicative should not lead us to neglect effective work within earlier traditions, and the illustrations quoted above make it clear that some learners at least are happy with procedures which are highly uncommunicative.

What these quoted accounts share is a sense of self-consciousness, often related to semi-conscious formulations about the nature of the target language. Marie Rambert talks about a 'clear idea of the relative construction of English phrases and French', and some kind of comparison underlies Trotsky's procedure also. This self-consciousness leads to commitment to hard

work which is reflected in Taylor's and Ransome's observations. To what extent do our current preoccupations in conventional methodology fail to allow for such commitment in our learners?

To explore this question I propose to discuss the social basis of recent changes in language teaching, before moving into the specific details of classroom practice. Language teaching is part of general education, and the major bases of its influence are as often social as linguistic or psychological.

Multilingualism in post-industrial society has often been viewed with some reserve, and especially in countries influenced by the British educational tradition. The elite tradition of the nineteenth century assumed that a knowledge of the languages of diplomacy, especially French, and of the classics was a necessary part of a satisfactory education. Governesses for girls, tutors and public schools for boys, ensured that language, among other attributes, separated the 'educated' from the rest. And 'language' here did not simply mean access to foreign languages, but also an accent (Daniel Jones bases his description of RP on 'everyday speech in the families of Southern English people who had been educated at the public schools' - Jones 1963: xv) and a dialect which the schools strove to preserve.

Meanwhile, throughout the country ordinary people, educated and uneducated, were variously multidialectal and multilingual as local circumstances dictated. Leith (1983, Chapter 6) summarises the cultural dominance of versions, and increasingly one version, of English over the indigenous languages, and discussion in the Swann Report (1985) and the Linguistic Minorities Project (1985) shows how similar patterns are developing in relation to more recent linguistic minorities. Languages in conflict are languages in contact, and varying degrees of multilingualism were more widespread, we may suspect, than a view based on the education system alone would allow.

But within education spoken communication was held to be generally unproblematic. Teaching was frequently heavily dependent on literacy - indeed on literature - in spite of the efforts of teachers associated with the Reform Movement (Howatt 1984: 169ff.). At various stages, middle class parents exposed their children to native-speaking tutors or governesses, or sent them for intensive and miserable (but effective) periods with overseas families. Some universities still interview prospective foreign language students in the target language, with the view that ability to converse should be acquired before starting the serious business of literary and cultural study. Nor is this pattern exclusively a British one: it is being repeated in many countries of the world as the EFL market expands, though recent innovations in methodology have had some impact.

The ability to converse in an appropriate foreign language may thus become a social marker as much as an educational one.

To some extent we may see recent developments in language

teaching methodology as reactions against this situation as much as psychological shifts in our views of the nature of language acquisition. There was a justification for the literary bias and the intellectualism of much foreign language teaching, once the premises were accepted. If education is primarily about identifying the very able, and providing them with the tools for self- and national development, then perhaps literacy can be taken for granted in the national language, and even perhaps the capacity to acquire a basic communicative competence in speech. Language teaching thus becomes a matter of adding the full comprehension necessary to be fully immersed in the target culture. Anyway, language learners need not necessarily expect a very close relationship with speakers of the languages they learn. (A model drawn from the classics will almost certainly have this effect!) Even much French teaching was based on the assumption that the main contact with the target language would be through reading the classics of French literature, a not unworthy aim.

But as we have all become partners through the European Community, rather than some of us dominate and some of us be dominated in a fundamentally colonial relationship, and as the work of bodies like the Council of Europe has become more influential, multilingualism has been increasingly recognised as a right rather than a rare privilege. Consequently schools are expected more and more to provide it for everyone, not just for a preselected elite of quasi-classicists. No longer could fluent mother-tongue literacy be taken for granted (if it ever really could); no longer could access to literature, philosophy, or 'educated discourse' be seen as primarily a matter of intelligence, however defined. Motivation became a more publicly discussed issue, it was assumed that straightforward conversation needed to be taught, and the traditional sources of fluency activity in earlier language teaching, reading and composition, were not so readily available for those who were not classified as readers or writers in their mother tongues.

Yet this shift developed just as resources for education were at a higher level than earlier, when teachers were reacting against the aridity of audiolingualism, and when general educational movements were supporting more small group work and greater learner autonomy. Educationalists were feeling guilty about privileged knowledge, and there was widespread willingness to discuss, if not implement, the priciples of deschooling.

It may be an appropriate question to ask, then, whether the communicative movement can, in any of its aspects, be criticised as part of a general, woolly, relativistic movement that permeated education as the impact of movements in the 1960s became diluted and diffused. What is there in the communicative movement that is hard and essential, and what is soft and expendable?

One immediate issue that arises from the extracts of autobiographies cited at the beginning of this paper is that language learning is not play, even if - with Arthur Ransome for instance - it takes on some of the characteristics of play. It may well





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be the case that language learning can be fun, but it can never be effortless.

A second point that emerges is that it may quite possibly be cognitive as well as affective or psycho-motor. Conscious or semi-conscious attention to form is perceived by some learners at least to be valuable - though we should note Taylor's contact with the grooms of the riding school, for fluency and communication may often complement accuracy and conscious effort.

We may note here a potential conflict between the social forces discussed above and the underlying assumptions of the language learners who have been quoted. An idealised system, or some point of reference for learners, may be necessary in education. This is one reason why languages are 'hard' subjects - there are wrong answers, and ignorance and failure are easily demonstrable. For learners to grope their way to an undefined goal may be inefficient in time and effort in normal classes, and the role of accuracy work needs clear definition. Furthermore, the widespread (and incorrect) belief that communicative work is more concerned with speech than with reading or writing tends to undermine seriousness of purpose, and a commitment to extended discourse. Is it not possible to produce a curriculum and a methodology which both enables learners to buy themselves cups of coffee and leads them towards reading Racine or Flaubert, Goethe or Fontane?

Recognition of linguistic variation should not lead us to refuse to accept models, as long as they are seen as no more than pedagogical devices, means of assisting learning. Language may be inextricably bound up with power, but effective learning provides learners with a means of using power for themselves. Literacy is to be taken, not withheld by an education system in the name of a meaningless equality. Because language, and the power associated with it, has been misused, is not a reason for arguing that there can be a world without power markers, whether linguistic or other.

We have gained from the communicative movement a greater sensitivity to learner needs. But there is a risk that this is at the expense of teachers' perceived expertise. Any teacher knows more about varieties of learning experience than any one learner. That is part of the expertise, acquired by training and experience, that teachers are paid to possess. Teachers may know more about needs, though they cannot know more about wants, than particular students. Too much emphasis on negotiation, in conventional state education particularly, may be educationally inefficient, especially in language work, where learners must be in a deficit situation in relation to the target language.

Too much emphasis on functional syllabuses may lead to simple muddled thinking, for the concept of function is too general to be related to precise syllabus needs. Our attention has been distracted from the much more important issue of the role of the syllabus, and the more important role of methodology

than was previously thought in early communicative discussion. Much of Mario Rinvolucri's work has been important in this area.

But we still need to consider what function a syllabus shou perform, for we still need to be accountable, and syllabus documents are the only means we have for laying ourselves open t criticism of our total approach, so that we can improve and question practice. What is clear is that there is still a role for grammar in a syllabus, providing the methodology is clear about the limitations of its role.

We still haven't clearly sorted out the relationship betwee teaching material and the learner. Much of the argument about authenticity has been ill-founded, for an essential feature of communicative principle has been the adjustment of language to the participants in the discourse, and learners are participants in a discourse. Material that is not adapted to learners is inauthentic to them, unless the methodology used by the teacher makes it authentic - and this is usually done by using simplification strategies! Even more, we have not sorted out the relationship between understanding, meaning, linguistic form, and motivation. Learners can respond to advanced material in areas that interest them, while they are still struggling with intermediate materials in areas that do not. One of the major losses of the recent movements in language teaching has been demanding and serious content. To quote a student in discussion, 'Who wants to spend all one's language learning time doing things tha can be done anyway in sign language?'

In effect, then, we can consider many gains from the communicative movement, but can still look for improvement in ou practice in a number of areas. To clarify the bases for improve activity, I propose to refer to the major characteristics of successful language learners identified by Naiman et al. (1978) in their analysis of 'The good language learner'. They state:

> Regardless of learner differences in our view the following emerge as essential for successful second language learning:
>
> 1. The learner must be active in his approach to learning and practice.
> 2. The learner must come to grips with language as a system.
> 3. The learner must use the language in real communication.
> 4. The learner must monitor his interlanguage.
> 5. The learner must come to terms with the affective demands of language learning.
>
> (Naiman et al. 1978: 103)

The first of these in fact asks for something approved by



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general educational practice in all subject areas, and supported by all schools of language learning and teaching. Nonetheless, many of the activities emphasised by communicative teaching will assist the development of this capacity, since there is a major concern for participant motivation.

The second claim raises more problems for communicative teaching. Many learners, as we saw with Rambert, enjoy being made aware of features of the language, and - as Pickett's survey demonstrates - often like to do this systematically. On the whole communicative teaching has moved away from specific and overt teaching of grammar towards activities with either functional or minimal structure. Only those methodologists who wish to retain a dual system, with accuracy represented in the classroom work as well as fluency, allow themselves the possibility of overt development of the system.

The third claim clearly gains support from communicative methodology, but the fourth again demands some awareness, of a fairly self-conscious kind, of the language forms and the language system. Here again an emphasis on accuracy is supported, and also an emphasis on correction as an aid to self-monitoring.

The final claim is addressed directly by practitioners of various humanistic approaches, more indirectly by all competent and well-trained teachers, but will still be assisted by learner success. Insofar as communicative approaches increase motivation they will have a role to play here, but insofar as they prevent learners doing things they find useful (like 'come to grips with the language as system' or monitor interlanguge) they may be counterproductive.

The key question in all this, however, is the link that may be established between the various parts of the process. Even the most effective advocates of communicative language teaching have only redressed a balance, restoring sensitivity to learner needs, communicative activity and realistic language activity. To some extent the emphasis on language as activity may have hindered serious engagement with the language system as a serious and demanding object of study. Sometimes one wonders whether many teachers have expectations of their learners that are far too pessimistic. Whether this is true in Ireland I cannot say, but it is certainly felt by many in Britain that low expectations contribute to low achievement.

One answer to the problem of lack of real demand in language courses is to call for more sophisticated content. But there is another line of approach worth considering, though I shall have to argue it at a fairly abstract level, as I have not been able to think it through fully. Nonetheless, as it is an area where there will certainly be much thinking in the next decade, it seems worth exploring a little in a conference on coping with change.

On the whole, language teaching methodologists have accepted

the outsider-view of the nature of language provided by researchers in linguistics and sociolinguistics during the past half-century. However, researchers are becoming dissatisfied with these models, and they are becoming increasingly inadequate as bases for language involvement in education.

The problem is that language use is closely bound up with individuals' identity. The kind of language we use is in part a choice, either conscious or unconscious, and this applies to language learners just as to language users, for the line betwee the two is not easily drawn (unless it is supported by heavy institutional markers, as it is in schools). One of my students in work not yet available, but hinted at in Rampton 1985, has shown that adoption of the role 'second-language-learner' is consciously or semi-consciously correlated with performance in English, so that different individuals may be more or less willing to operate second-language 'mistakes' in different contexts. If these contexts can be related to role-set, or to the identity being adopted by the language user, language errors become either genuine errors, or choices of social dialect, or a combination of the two. (This playing with errors is something we are all aware of in jokes and informal situations with language learners, especially in phonology, but this research suggests it has a serious side as well.)

Again, we may wish to see the whole issue of 'target language' and 'mother tongue' as problematic (Bourne 1985). These are not stable entities, and where learners locate themselves within such entities will depend on their own perceptions of wha gains there are in the location they choose. And all this suggests that we should see language learning as necessarily an act of identity, and not of one where we shall impose the identities we have thought important on our pupils. At the very least, we need to ask what being a speaker of French, German, Spanish (or indeed Irish or English!) means in Ireland: what group is one bidding to join as a speaker or reader of German living in Ireland? What kinds of expression and what kinds of understanding are appropriate for someone who is resident in Ireland? What kind of people are they trying to be? Is anything more than the coffee-buying model appropriate? Particularly, how would a learner want to be perceived as a user of the language being learnt?

These are not questions I can answer for Ireland, and it would be impertinent for me to try. I raise them, though, because they indicate directions of change beyond the communicative movement, and may give us the beginnings of a basis for overcoming some of the weaknesses in that movement. Certainly they will force us to confront some of the questions about language teaching and ideology that have been neglected in the past but which are highly relevant to language learners.

Chekhov, when asked how a certain part in one of his plays should be acted, replied 'As well as possible'. Whether languag teaching should be communicative (or audiolingual or humanistic

or objectively graded) seems an inappropriate question. What it should be is 'as good as possible'. Let us hope that discussion can contribute to that task.

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